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ACM Head: Consider Governing Review of Research



Dr. Peter J. Denning

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — The scientific community should seriously consider Central Intelligence Agency suggestions that DP and electronics research done in the private sector undergo a formal government review process, the head of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) said last week.

If the government can prove contentions that the publication of research results is jeopardizing national security, most scientists would agree to some corrective measures, Dr. Peter J. Denning, ACM president, said in a telephone interview. Denning's remarks were in response to a recent speech by Deputy CIA Director Adm. Bobby R. Inman, who said national security considerations should be routinely considered in the peer review process when research papers are being prepared for publication [CW, Jan. 18].

Inman noted the existence of the Public Cryptograph Study Group, representing the intelligence agencies and the academic and scientific communities, which reviews cryptography research findings. He suggested the same process should be extended to other fields, including "computer hardware and software and other electronic gear and techniques."

Denning said that "at the very least I think his proposal deserves discussion" because "it is basically compatible with the idea of openness." He noted that the review committee's opinions are advisory and researchers and editors are free to publish no matter what the committee finds.

"Most scientists are concerned that their work ... not interfere with national security," according to Denning, chairman of the Purdue University computer science department. He "would probably be very cooperative" with government agencies if they were to suggest ways to publish his work that would not damage national security.

Denning noted this is "a very, very sensitive issue" and there are "very, very strong feelings on both sides of it." He himself is "committed to the principle of openness" and feels "we shouldn't tamper with" scientific freedom. Therefore, he said, he would like to see more data to prove or disprove Inman's supposed "hemorrhage" of U.S. technology to the USSR.

"Right now there is a certain amount of fuzzy thinking in government circles about technology transfer mechanisms," according to Denning, who said that Americans have indeed come up with the short end in scientific exchange programs with the USSR.

and manufacturing techniques that would be most helpful to the Soviet military.

Most technology transfer problems, "can be handled without choking off the bulk of scientific publication," Denning said. He suggested that an open discussion of the issues, perhaps in a public congressional hearing, could make the situation clearer.

If there really is a national security problem resulting from the publication of electronics research, he said, Inman's idea is better than "more Draconian measures" of secrecy that might be imposed by Congress.

Inman's suggestion that scientists risk a backlash of public and congressional opinion against their work will be seen by some "as a kind of veiled threat" of government censorship, Denning said. But, "being an optimist," he prefers to think of it as Inman's attempt "to find some kind of middle ground" between the two "extreme positions" of complete scientific freedom and government censorship.

Inman's plan for a "cooperative agreement" between government and the scientific community may be "a reasonable solution to the problem," according to Denning, who said "there are possibilities of compromise" between the two sides.

"Inman's proposals have that potential," Denning said.